

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at a Naturalization Ceremony for Active Duty Servicemembers and Military Spouses

July 4, 2014

Thank you, everybody. Please be seated. Good morning to the—good morning and welcome to the White House. And Happy Fourth of July!

Now, Deputy Secretary Mayorkas, thank you for taking care of the important part of this morning, which is administering the oath. That's the thing that we wanted to make sure we got right. To Acting Deputy Director Jones; to family, friends, distinguished guests: Thank you all for being here. And finally, to these 25 men and women, servicemembers and spouses, it is an honor to join everyone here, for the first time, in calling you "our fellow Americans."

Now, this is one of my favorite events to do, and not just because we get to have a barbecue and watch fireworks later. [*Laughter*] It's because each of you has traveled a long journey to this moment, journeys that began in places like Jamaica and Germany, China and Guatemala. And yet somehow—either because your parents brought you here as children or because you made the choice yourselves as adults—you ended up here in America.

And then many of you did something extraordinary: You signed up to serve in the United States military. You answered the call to fight and potentially to give your life for a country that you didn't fully belong to yet. You understood what makes us American is not just circumstances of birth or the names in our family tree, it's that timeless belief that from many we are one; that we are bound together by adherence to a set of beliefs and unalienable rights; that we have certain obligations to each other, to look after each other, and to serve one another. And over the years, that's exactly what you've done.

Rodrigo Laquian came to the United States from the Philippines. He joined the Navy because, he said, he "wanted to be a part of something big and important. To be a part of a great cause." Today Petty Officer Second Class Laquian is still part of that great cause, and today he's also an American citizen.

Stephanie Van Ausdall moved here from Canada with her mom when she was 18 years old. And today she's 26 and a sergeant in the Army. Stephanie says she joined the military "to give my children someone to look up to and someone they can be proud of." Stephanie, I know that you've made your children and all of us very proud.

Oscar Gonzalez was born in Guatemala and became a marine last year. Becoming a citizen, he says, means becoming part of a "society that strives and stands for good all around the world—just being a part of that makes me complete." Well, Oscar, welcoming you as an American citizen makes our country a little more complete, so thank you.

And then there are those of you who married an American servicemember, and as a military spouse, you've been serving our country as well. Diana Baker is originally from Kenya and met her husband Kowaine in Germany. Today she's a nurse at Frederick Memorial Hospital in Maryland, and she and her husband have four beautiful children. In Diana's words, "Becoming a citizen of the United States is like joining a club of the best of the best." [*Laughter*] And I agree. Congratulations, Diana, on joining the club.

Together, all of you remind us that America is and always has been a nation of immigrants. Throughout our history, immigrants have come to our shores in wave after wave, from every corner of the globe. Every one of us, unless we're Native American, has an ancestor who was born somewhere else.

And even though we haven't always looked the same or spoken the same language, as Americans, we've done big things together. We've won this country's freedom together. We've built our greatest cities together. We've defended our way of life together. We've continued to perfect our Union together.

And that's what makes America special. That's what makes us strong. The basic idea of welcoming immigrants to our shores is central to our way of life, it is in our DNA. We believe our diversity, our differences, when joined together by a common set of ideals, makes us stronger, makes us more creative, makes us different. From all these different strands, we make something new here in America. And that's why, if we want to keep attracting the best and the brightest from beyond our shores, we're going to have to fix our immigration system, which is broken, and pass commonsense immigration reform.

We shouldn't be making it harder for the best and the brightest to come here and create jobs here and grow our economy here. We should be making it easier. And that's why I'm going to keep doing——

[At this point, an audience member applauded.]

He agrees with me. *[Applause]* So I'm going to keep doing everything I can do to keep making our immigration system smarter and more efficient so hard-working men and women like all of you have the opportunity to join the American family and to serve our great Nation, so we can be stronger and more prosperous and more whole together.

I'll close with a quick story. George Mardikian was an immigrant from Armenia who became a famous chef. And George had a quote that I think will ring true for most immigrants. He said, "You who have been born in America, I wish I could make you understand what it is like not to be an American—not to have been an American all your life—and then suddenly, to be one, for that moment and forever after."

Today, on this Fourth of July, all across the country—from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello to the Alamodome in Texas—immigrants from around the world are taking the oath of citizenship. And many of them have worked and sacrificed for years to get to this moment. All of them have done it for something none of us should ever take for granted: the right to be called an American, from this moment and forever after.

And that fact should give us hope and should make us confident about the future of our country. Because as long as there are men and women like all of you who are willing to give so much for the right to call yourselves Americans, and as long as we do our part to keep the door open to those who are willing to earn their citizenship, then we're going to keep on growing our economy, we'll continue to journey forward, and we'll remind the world why the United States of America is and always will be the greatest nation on Earth. And we're very proud of you. Congratulations.

God bless you. God bless the United States of America. And now I'd like to turn it over to Deputy Secretary Mayorkas. Congratulations.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:24 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas; and Rendell Jones, Acting Deputy Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

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